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THE PLAGUE OF CITY NOISES.

BY J. H. GIRDNER, M.D.

MAN is entirely dependent on his five senses for all the knowledge he receives concerning the material world. The nerves which supply the organs of hearing, sight, smell, taste, and touch, or the tactile sense, are the only channels through which information with regard to objects of nature can be obtained; they are consequently the primitive source of all conscious relation with the rest of creation. Destroy these channels, or suspend their operation, and consciousness ceases, and the individual is placed precisely on a par with the vegetable kingdom. In fact, physical man might properly be defined as five senses mounted on stilts, and endowed with the power of reason and locomotion.

The impressions made upon the organs of hearing, sight, etc., are transmitted over their respective nerves to the sensorium as raw material, if one may use such an expression; and there they are transformed into sensations, prior to being reflected to other parts of the organism.

It at once becomes apparent what a vast influence the operation of the senses must exert on our mental, moral, and physical well being. It is also surprising how little care and thought are taken, not alone by the individual, but also by constituted authority, to protect these delicate organs from unnecessary irritation. Such neglect is especially manifest with regard to the sense of hearing, and it is this fact which brings me to my present purpose, viz.: to call attention to the painful and injurious effect of city noises on the whole nervous system, and to make such suggestions as a careful study of the subject seems to warrant. I do not wish to be considered an alarmist, or hypercritical, but it seems to me the time has come when something should be done to lessen

the constant and largely unnecessary outrages committed on the sense of hearing of the residents of large cities.

The deleterious effect of the constant shock or concussion of unpleasant and non-musical sounds on the auditory apparatus is demonstrated beyond question by the fact that nearly all boiler makers, according to the highest authorities on diseases of the ear, are hard of hearing. There is a well-recognized condition of congestion, amounting sometimes to inflammation, in the internal ear, which otologists class under the general name of *boiler makers' disease*; but this is liable to occur also, and does occur, in all classes of persons who are exposed, as the inhabitants of the metropolis of New York are, to the continual rattle, roar, and screams which assault their ear drums at nearly all hours of the day and night.

Professor Roosa, a world-famous specialist on diseases of the eye and ear, writing on the effects of excessive discordant sounds on the acoustic nerve, says: "That it must necessarily be as harmful to the nerve of hearing, as is excessive light to that of sight, is a natural deduction from our knowledge of the effects of the waves that produce these two senses, and all experience confirms the belief that there may be an acoustic neuritis produced by noise as well as optic neuritis caused by exposure to a glare."

The ceaseless assault of confused and discordant noises on the auditory apparatus is not confined in its destructive effects to those organs alone, but the brain and the whole nervous system are likewise made to suffer in consequence of it.

The act of hearing should not require attention. Under ordinary circumstances, no effort calling out consciousness of the operation is elicited. The vibrations, or sound waves, are conducted to the sensorium, where they are interpreted and duly considered. But when a Babel of discordant sounds and noises of every degree of harshness and force is poured into the auditory canals, an effort, indeed, is required to catch the sounds we wish to interpret, and to eliminate those which are not only of no consequence, but positively painful. This sustained effort of selection and elimination is an incalculable strain and source of exhaustion to our nervous energy. The fact that persons who live in the midst of confusing and discordant noises, as do the dwellers in large cities, become in time accustomed to them, is no

proof that the noises are any the less destructive and exhausting to the brain and nervous system. Such persons have only become expert in discriminating and selecting the sounds in which they may be interested at the moment.

The habitual drunkard can take large potations of alcohol into his system without its producing any of the ordinary signs of intoxication. He has grown accustomed to the effects of the stimulant; but does any one suppose, that for this reason, the injurious effect of the alcohol on the tissues of his body is any the less pronounced ?

Observe the confusing and almost stupefying effect on the inhabitant of the way-back rural district when he visits the city for the first time. He is the butt of every joke, not necessarily because he has a faulty sensorium ; in this respect he may be, and often is, far better off than those who laugh at him ; his trouble is, that he has no skill in selecting and discarding among the million sights and sounds that rush in upon his consciousness.

There can be no question but that a vast amount of nerve energy is expended on the sense of hearing and discriminating noises in a city like New York. Add to this the wear and tear, the jarring and actual pain produced on the sensorium by the endless roar in which we live, and you have a most potent factor in the production of that bane of modern city life, neurasthenia-or nervous prostration.

If the above facts are true for the well, how much greater are the deleterious effects of city noises on the sick. Recognizing the detriment to their patients from this source, most of our hospitals have succeeded in having asphalt pavement put down in the streets near them, and thus have secured some relief. But not all the sick are in hospitals; tens of thousands are sick at their homes, and except where they have sufficient "pull" to be allowed to put tanbark over the cobble-stones in front of the house, they must grin and bear the suffering and injury imposed upon them by the jarring sounds of the street.

Opposition to unnecessary noise and noise-makers, and the demand for reform in this respect, is not based alone on the annoyance they cause, though that would be quite sufficient to justify rebellion. The main ground of our contention is the broad physiological truth that rest is necessary to health, and that over-stimulation and irritation of the brain and nervous sys-

tem, whether it takes place through the auditory or some other set of nerves, is essentially disease-producing.

It is, of course, impossible to state exactly what part noise in New York city plays in the death rate and the sick list, but every physician knows it must be considerable. How often the physician in his daily rounds finds it necessary to prescribe "perfect quiet" in order that the flickering spark of life remaining in the patient may be brought back to a healthy flame. Yet in nine cases out of ten, that perfect quiet he deems so important cannot be had, owing to the noises from the street. Especially is this true in warm weather when windows must be kept open.

The makers of unnecessary noises in New York are not confined to any one class. All are more or less guilty, from the church people to the organ grinder and the street peddler. Any one who studies this subject and observes carefully will be astonished and disgusted at the reckless disregard of each for the health, peace, and comfort of all the others.

If you should go for a walk in Fifth Avenue on a fine afternoon and all sorts and conditions of people were to begin to assault you with switches, you would call the police; they would be promptly arrested and properly punished. What for? They have not killed you, or maimed you, or drawn any blood, and you are apparently none the worse for these assaults. What they have done is to irritate the nerve terminations of one of your five senses, viz.: that of touch, or the tactile sense, and through the nerves of this sense they have made you conscious of painful sensations. This is exactly the treatment you do receive from these same people, by their unnecessary assaults on another sense, viz.: that of hearing. But should you ask the authorities to interfere in this case, you would likely be arrested yourself, and your sanity inquired into. This remarkable inconsistency—the prompt protection of one of our senses from assault, and the utter disregard of another—seems almost unaccountable, except on the ground of custom and habit. It is simply another instance of patience and long suffering under abuse, for which the American public has become famous.

It is impossible to conduct the ordinary affairs of life in a city without producing a certain amount of noise. It is also true that a given disturbance produces a much louder and more penetrating sound in the city than it does in the country. The

high, continuous walls of the houses on both sides make the street partake somewhat of the character of a whispering gallery, and the sound waves reverberate from wall to wall, thus greatly increasing their power of penetration.

These facts are the strongest arguments in favor of suppressing the *unnecessary* noises.

The noises and noise-makers in New York City are legion. Some are necessary, some are partly necessary, and some are wholly superfluous, and should be treated as public nuisances.

The best way to study the city noises, it seems to me, is to divide them into groups.

1. Noises produced by horses and wheeled vehicles.
2. Noises produced by street peddlers, beggars, street musicians, etc.
3. Noises produced by bells, whistles, clocks, etc.
4. Noises produced by animals other than horses, as cats, birds, etc.
5. All noises which come from the inside of our houses, as persons learning to play musical instruments, training the voice, etc., etc.
6. Explosives.

Nearly every kind of city noise will find its proper place under one of the above headings. It would be interesting to study each individual in these six groups, and to point out which are necessary and which unnecessary, and to suggest the remedy in each particular case, but it would lead us far beyond the proper limits of a magazine article. I propose to select one or two examples from each of the groups for detailed study, and to make such suggestions as seem proper, and allow the reader to go on with the remainder of the group himself.

The first group, that is, noises produced by horses and wheeled vehicles, includes street cars, steam cars, elevated cars, and all kinds of carriages whether used for business or pleasure. These are largely necessary noises, but much can be done to lessen their annoying effect. Asphalt pavement on all streets is the one thing needed above all others. It is practically a noiseless pavement, or should be, so far as the carriage itself is concerned: only the clatter of the horses' feet is heard, and that must be put down as unavoidable until we get horseless carriages. Asphalt pavement in New York is, however, far from being noiseless. The old

loose cast-iron manhole cover, which appears at frequent intervals in the otherwise noiseless asphalted street, sends forth a sudden and ear-splitting sound every time a wheel passes over it. I know of no single source of noise that is so annoying, especially to the sick, as this one. This noise is wholly unnecessary, and there is no excuse for its continuance. Manhole covers, which are themselves asphalted and properly fitted to their frames, make a continuously smooth pavement, and are noiseless. These should take the place of the miserable old rattle-traps now used. This is, of course, the business of the Public Works Department.

The cartman who drives through a street with the body of the cart banging the shafts at every stride of the horse ought to be stopped by the police, and made to fasten the body firmly to the frame.

A few pieces of old burlap placed between the iron rails, when a load of that material is to be drawn through the streets, would prevent one of the worst brain-bruising assaults we suffer from.

The second group—noises produced by street peddlers, beggars, street musicians, etc.—are entirely unnecessary. These noise-makers should be treated as public nuisances. The few thousand engaged in buying and selling rags and bottles, water-melons, etc., have no right to disturb the peace and quiet, and to actually injure the health of the rest of the inhabitants of a city by hourly yelling their wares through the streets. No hardship could result to these people; for does any one suppose that the traffic in rags, bottles, watermelons, etc., would be injured by having it conducted decently and in order?

The mendicant, whose mournful cry for alms in the public street is so common and annoying, should be taken to one of the many institutions which public and private charity has so lavishly provided for such unfortunates.

As for the so-called street musicians, it seems that any din or clamor an Oriental or South Sea Islander chooses to call music is sacred, and must be accepted at par without a protest by the rest of us.

The third group, according to our arrangement, includes noises produced by bells, whistles, clocks, etc. These are nearly all unnecessary. Church bells and clocks were useful at a time when congregations were scattered, and clocks and watches were rare. But none of these conditions exists in New York in

these days. Watches and clocks are always at hand to tell us the hour for church and for business, and the sweet quiet of the Sabbath morning should not be disturbed by the clanging of bells on church steeples, nor should our sleep at night be disturbed by their clocks pounding out the hours.

Every citizen should be required to provide a box where his mail could be deposited and the shrill ear-splitting, useless post-man's whistle should be abolished.

Noises produced by animals, such as cats, birds, dogs, etc., which constitute our fourth group, are unnecessary. Think of the vast increase in the aggregate number of hours of restful sleep that would be obtained by the inhabitants of this city if all the cats were removed from our back yards, to say nothing of the decrease in soul-losing profanity. An ordinance requiring all persons who wish to keep a cat to take out a license and keep said cat in the house, and all other cats to be removed to the pound, is all that would be necessary.

Noises from the inside of our houses comprise the fifth group. If the music teachers could be induced to take their pupils into the country to train their voices and teach them instrumentation, life for many would be all the sweeter. The well-to-do folks set a bad example. At a fashionable reception my lady's drawing-room becomes a pandemonium of shouting, screeching women, each doing her best to make herself understood.

The sixth and last of the groups is explosives. Let us be thankful that this torture is confined mostly to one day in the year, the Fourth of July. The day following our last national holiday, I called on a patient, a weak, emaciated, exhausted woman, who had for days been hovering between life and death. She was much worse than the day before, and I wish the City Fathers could have gazed upon her pale, weary, drawn face and heard the pathetic voice as she said: "I could not get a minute's rest yesterday nor last night owing to the noise in the street; every explosion seemed to be tearing the nerves from my body." And this was only one instance out of thousands. These Fourth of July noises in the city are not only unnecessary but are a gross outrage. If Young America must celebrate this day with explosives, make him get out of the city to do it.

To complain of abuses and to point out the remedy is not

enough to insure reform. The newspapers for a long time have called attention editorially and otherwise to the need of checking the reckless noise-makers. Letters from sufferers are constantly published calling attention to specific cases of unnecessary noise, but these efforts are sporadic. No concert of action or systematic crusade has been attempted to lessen the noises in New York city, and until that is done I see no hope of any improvement.

I believe the solution of the problem will be found in the organization of a society. Call it the Society for the Prevention of Noise. It should have a charter and certain powers and responsibilities conferred upon it by the Legislature. It should be modeled somewhat after the pattern of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, or the Gerry Society. It should make a study of the noises of the city, and through its own powers, and by advice and coöperation with the various city departments suppress such noises as are unnecessary, and reduce those that are necessary to the minimum of disturbance. Such a work could not fail to be of immense benefit to the public both in the matter of comfort and health. And the last word on the advantage of a city of comparative peace and quiet cannot be said, until account is taken of the assistance such a state of things would render the individual in securing that inward peace which passeth understanding.

J. H. GIRDNER.